

# The Immigrant's Bed

FLORIN ION FIRIMITĂ

## For twenty-five years I lived an unsettled

life in a city abandoned by history. Successively occupied by the Ottomans, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Germans, and the Soviets, Bucharest was slowly transformed from a cosmopolitan Romanian capital (the “other Paris,” it was nicknamed in the 1900s) into a Stalinist Disneyland.

My family spent their lives in a state of historical limbo. I could never figure out why my mother, with her strong roots in the pre-communist bourgeoisie, had married my father, a peasant born in a dirt-floor adobe house who later became an engineer. They never joined the party, but their common distaste for politics was not what kept their marriage afloat; I wondered what did. Although they mysteriously belonged together, they didn't seem to belong anywhere.

We had our happy moments, especially during summers spent at the family's country house a few hundred miles from the city. In that place of peaceful dirt roads winding along green hills, history seemed never to intrude. I took fishing trips with my teenage friends, stole corn and cherries from unguarded fields and orchards, played in the dirt, watched wild horses roaming the fields, and occasionally fell in love with a local girl. I also started painting the lush surrounding landscapes. I had friends, and I had art. Who needed history?

But history set in again when we returned to the compromised capital — breathing its dust, feeling the ghetto-like frigidity of its cement-block houses, experiencing its painful absence of nature. George Orwell's *1984* was like a cruel screenplay for our lives. While the government restricted personal property, demolished churches, and turned monasteries into stables, old villas abandoned by fleeing American oilmen were given rent-free to government apparatchiks. In the 1970s a law was passed restricting the square footage of living space a person could own. As a result, my maternal grandmother's large country house was confiscated, and she moved in with us, bringing with her valuable antiques, a briefcase full of jewelry, and her large mahogany bed. She died shortly thereafter.

A few years later, the country house was demolished by the government, and a cement factory was built on the site. I believe the destruction of the house and its beautiful surrounding gardens led to my father's untimely death from a heart attack. My mother and I were forced to move to ever-smaller apartments, in which we never felt at home. In 1982, we ended up in an apartment complex built for retired Communist Party spies and military officers. The very people most closely involved with the repressive regime — people who had indirectly contributed to my family's decline — became our next-door neighbors.

WILLIAM CARTER

**The following year, I graduated from high school, and my mother became paralyzed and ill with cancer. We had little savings, so I took odd jobs and sold some of our antiques and jewelry to help us get by, fiercely guarding the artworks, rugs, and furniture that were left. We kept my grandmother's bed, in which my mother now slept. I slept in an uncomfortable armchair in the living room, jumping up whenever she needed a glass of water or a morphine shot.**



My best friend, Pamf, who was studying for the admission exams to a local engineering school, spent most of his evenings at my place. Sometimes I would set up my easel in the living room and paint. I quizzed him on his subjects while he cooked for us. He did his homework by candlelight, and we both listened for irregularities in my mother's breathing. When Pamf stayed over, he slept on the parquet floor, using his backpack as a pillow. During the winter, we

had only a few hours of electricity, hot water, and heat each day. So we perfected the art of heating the apartment using the gas oven and sleeping fully clothed, stuffing newspapers under our sweaters for extra warmth. We were both waiting for a miracle, but none came. My mother soon gave in to her illness, leaving me, at seventeen, all by myself in that minuscule one-bedroom apartment, surrounded by the echoes of my vanished family.

After the funeral, Pamf and I returned to the apartment and had something to eat. Neither of us felt like talking. I was washing a few dishes in the kitchen when he said, "At least now you can use the bed."

My hands started to shake, and one of the plates landed in the metal sink, breaking into several pieces.

One Sunday morning, Pamf's father showed up at my door with cans of paint and rollers, and we painted the walls of the bedroom and moved the furniture around. Even so, I found it hard to spend time in there. How could I leaf through the pages of a novel while lying on the bed in which my mother had died? How could I have any restful nights there?

A few weeks later a neighbor came and kindly reupholstered the bed in a fresh, flowery fabric. I thanked him, but continued to sleep in the armchair or on the wooden floor. Although I lived in that apartment for three more years, I never slept in the old mahogany bed.

With the diligence of a museum guard, I watched over the remaining family artifacts. I replaced the simple lock on the front door with a large deadbolt. I don't know if the lock foiled thieves, but it took me nearly a minute to get inside my apartment each time I came home.

I repeatedly failed my entrance exams to the school of fine arts, but Pamf made it into the engineering program. I stopped painting; in fact, I stopped thinking, smiling, reading, sleeping. Sometimes in the evening, Pamf would stop by, and we would go out for a walk. We spent many nights wandering the section of the city where the Communist elite lived, peering like voyeurs into their houses. We envied the anonymous lives behind those quiet curtains, beyond those windows in which colorful flowers turned toward the daylight.

## **The following Christmas, after the fall of the**

Berlin Wall and Prague's Velvet Revolution, it was Bucharest's turn to rise against communism. For several weeks at the close of 1989, my city was turned into a war zone. Caught in the streets by the chaos, I couldn't make my way back home. A trip that normally would have taken thirty minutes now took several days. Dodging burning buses and lunatics firing AK-47s from their cars, I finally arrived at my apartment, where the power and water were off and the refrigerator held only a bottle of champagne and a loaf of bread. The ghost of my Christmas tree dominated the living room. I ate the bread, drank a glass of champagne, and collapsed into a dreamless sleep on the cold kitchen floor.

The next morning, that place ceased to be my home. I suddenly stopped belonging to that sad dwelling, as if a magic hand had freed me of my past. I knew then that I would leave. The U.S. was an unreachable planet viewed only through the large posters displayed on the fence of the American embassy in Bucharest, but for my generation it seemed the only place where dreams could become reality. I focused all my efforts on getting there.

In those days, you could not trust even your own shadow, so, helped by a network of close friends, I sold my belongings at night: my parents' collection of Japanese bronzes and Russian

Orthodox icons; the heavy, baroque furniture and expensive Persian rugs. After a few months, all I had left were a telephone, a blanket, a radio, my mother's bed, and two thousand dollars (a real treasure in a country where the average salary was forty dollars a month). I bought two cardboard boxes and, with a thick black marker, wrote on one, in Romanian, "Trecut," and on the other, "Vitor": "Past" and "Future." I filled the "Past" box mainly with family photos and my journals, then packed it into a suitcase. There was nothing to put in the other box. Pamf threw it in the garbage.

On the evening I was to leave my country for good, Pamf came over with a bottle of red wine. I turned the radio on — as it happened, to a performance of Mozart's Requiem. We passed the bottle back and forth and didn't say a word. In the empty apartment the music gained an added resonance, as if in a cathedral. There's a terrifying joy in owning nothing but the desire to start over. I remember feeling happy and strangely at home, as if somehow, out of emptiness, the world was about to begin.

After a while, we got up and turned off the radio. Pamf picked up one of my suitcases, and I picked up the other. My train, bound for Belgrade, would leave in a few hours. I took one last look at that place and listened, for the last time, to its echoes. The phone started to ring, but I didn't pick it up.

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